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ON WORDS:

CLAUSEWITZ, BIN LADEN, AND PUBLIC SUPPORT

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As the events of September 11, 2001 crashed down on millions of Twin Towers and Pentagons on every television and information medium worldwide, the American psyche suffered feelings of shock, sorrow, fear, and anger. But perhaps the emotion hardest to deal with was that of vulnerability – how could someone use our very way of life as a weapon to attack the world’s superpower?

Osama bin Laden must have read Clausewitz. The terrorist acts of September 11th illustrate a thorough understanding of the nature and conduct of war as presented by Clausewitz in *On War*. By analyzing those same theories as they relate to the events of September 11th, I plan to suggest a strategic course of action that strikes back at Osama bin Laden’s center of gravity.

Clausewitzian Primer

Clausewitz refers to a paradoxical trinity of war: the blind natural force, which concerns the people; the chance and probability, which concern the commander and the military; and the subordination to policy, which concerns the government.¹ This trinity is often presented in theoretical shorthand as the people, the military, and the government of a given nation. But this oversimplification sells Clausewitz short. He intended these aspects of the trinity to serve as a psychological construct, to help us understand and develop a theory of war. A theory of war, according to Clausewitz, must balance these three areas, and take into account the interrelationships between each.

Clausewitz’ trinity helps us understand the center of gravity – the dominant characteristic of the enemy, “the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.”²

Clausewitz and the Terrorist

Application of Clausewitzian theory to the actions of September 11th requires first an analysis of bin Laden's goals and objectives. From there, we can determine "the kind of war on which [he is] embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature."³

It is easy to look at the devastation and tragedy of September 11th and label them senseless acts of desperate people. They are neither. On September 12th, George Will defined the purpose of terrorism: "...to deprive a government of respect and legitimacy....The real aim of terrorism is not to destroy people or physical assets, still less to score anything remotely resembling military victories. Rather, its purpose is to demoralize."⁴ Bruce Hoffman, director of the Washington office of the Rand Corporation, holds the view that all terrorists have goals, and "it is dangerous to see them only as madmen bent on destruction...he [bin Laden] could be understood as someone who is trying to start a civil war, or a series of civil wars, in the Middle East."⁵ Stanley Bedlington, while a senior analyst at CIA's counterterrorism center from 1978 to 1994, studied Osama bin Laden. He sees bin Laden's ambitions stretching far beyond simply striking down the United States: "Based on his own statements and those of his close associates, bin Laden wants to be portrayed in the Islamic world as a latter-day caliph, or supreme ruler, in the image of the Prophet Muhammad's successors – a figure who can unite all of Islam."⁶ Bin Laden's own words on a recent videotaped message emphasize this larger goal: "Our nation has been tasting this humiliation and this degradation for more than 80 years. Its sons are killed, its blood is shed, its sanctuaries are attacked, and no one hears and no one heeds." Mary-Jane Deeb, Arab world specialist at the Library of Congress, explained this phrase as bin Laden's method of emphasizing that the Muslim community has no leader, because a true leader would deliver his people from their pain and suffering. The inference is that since he is responding to their concerns, he should be their leader.⁷ This theme of supreme control is reflected in foreign press as well. The Turkish Daily News warns that "One of bin Laden's goals is to replace the regimes in a number

of Arab countries including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan. This ideology involves the toppling of these regimes by resorting to force.”⁸

So if bin Laden’s political goal is to be the supreme ruler of a united nation of Islam, why would he trouble himself with the “infidels” of the United States? Choosing the world’s strongest country, with the largest military, as a military objective seems counterintuitive. Yet how better to gain legitimacy than to demoralize the world’s most powerful nation? Conquering smaller nations in the Middle East might have concerned political analysts, but it would not have captured our national attention – or that of our media – with the same magnitude. In bin Laden’s quest for caliph status, the United States is an effective, intermediate military objective.

United States’ Center of Gravity

Once he has determined that the United States is his military objective, bin Laden is then faced with the formidable task of determining how to eat the elephant. Clausewitz tells us that “everyone gauges his opponent in the light of his reputed talents, his age, and his experience.”⁹ No doubt bin Laden followed this sage advice, studying the United States’ political process, recent military actions, and cultural framework, looking for our center of gravity.

The government of the United States did not prove to be a valuable target. Prior to September 11th, the president did not appear to be very popular; he barely won the election. Furthermore, the delegation of presidential authority in the U.S. is well defined and redundant. Removing the head would prove ineffective; the next in line would simply assume command. And with elections occurring every few years, it appears no leader has any extended influence in the United States.

Likewise, U.S. military was not bin Laden’s answer to the center of gravity question. The U.S. military is significant in size, and possesses the most sophisticated and technologically advanced arsenal on earth. The forces are organized, well led, and dispersed throughout the globe, making them difficult to target.

That brings us to bin Laden's real target: the passion and the people of the United States. He understands that what matters most in this country is not our government leaders, nor our military, but the citizens who, with all their democratic freedoms, influence all other aspects of the American way of life. Clausewitz warns that all military action is intertwined with psychological forces and effects.¹⁰ This point was made ultimately clear on September 11th as Bin Laden planned for, and reveled in, the psychological impact of the world's strongest nation being brought to its knees by nineteen thugs, armed only with box cutters and the rudimentary knowledge of commercial aircraft.

Did He Get It Wrong?

But why choose to attack the United States? America is THE superpower, capable of significant retaliatory consequences. Why would anyone tempt the wrath of America, killing thousands of innocent civilians on our own soil? For bin Laden, this choice was a logical outcome of his study of our recent history, and of his own experiences with the United States.

Over the past few years, a series of terrorist attacks have taught bin Laden that he need not worry about the United States engaging in any lengthy or meaningful response. The World Trade Center was a target in 1993; a 1995 bombing in Saudi Arabia killed five U.S. military personnel; in 1996, the bombing at Khobar Towers claimed 19 American service members' lives, and injured 200 more; U.S. embassies in Africa were the targets in 1998; and in October of 2000, the USS Cole was struck, killing 17 U.S. sailors. After each of these incidents, the U.S. aimed a few cruise missiles at the suspect's infrastructure, but the true consequences of terrorism were negligible. We were not interested—nor could we be antagonized into being interested—in approaching the war on terrorism with any serious military response. Our actions spoke louder—or softer—than our rhetoric.

This same softness appeared in a number of military actions, from Somalia, to the Balkans. Our level of interest dropped off drastically when it appeared that our monetary and moral support alone would not win the day. Bin Laden perceived the U.S. as morally weak.

Andrew Sullivan in The London Times captured it best: “Americans’ critical weakness in the past two decades has been their reluctance to shed blood for their goals. They believed they could construct a huge military and never have it fight real wars and suffer real casualties.”¹¹ Perhaps this is what Clausewitz was warning us about when he said, “War is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst. The maximum use of force is in no way incompatible with the simultaneous use of the intellect.”¹²

Action = Reaction

Clausewitz goes on to say that military action must expect positive reactions, and because it is difficult to calculate psychological forces, “the very nature of interaction is bound to make it unpredictable.”¹³ Whatever our previous responses might have led him to expect, bin Laden could not have predicted how the United States, and the rest of the world, would respond to September 11th.

Bin Laden accurately targeted the people—the passion—of the United States as our center of gravity. He may have expected a humiliated, devastated people to fold under the pressure of such great loss, or he may have expected an angry, revengeful people to demand instant and significant retaliation. With either response, he planned to come away the winner. We fall, or we rise up with such force that he can use our response to his advantage, and in either case, he is the supreme leader.

But war is unpredictable. As a nation, we did not react as bin Laden had planned. A connected, electronically savvy public made an immediate counterstrike. With cellular telephones, pagers, and e-mail as weapons, Americans shared real time intelligence. Passengers aboard United Airlines Flight 93 re-hijacked their airplane, crashing it in a field in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, less than 90 minutes after the first aircraft struck the World Trade Center. America’s passion poured out, as those passengers proved to bin Laden that they, too, would be willing suicide pilots. “Savage peoples are ruled by passion, civilized peoples by the mind. The difference lies not in the respective natures of savagery and civilization, but in their attendant circumstances...even the most civilized of peoples can be fired with passionate hatred...”¹⁴

Yet the unpredictability did not end with this first passionate reaction. A nation previously absorbed in the stock market and a congressman's indiscretions got serious on homeland defense, and foreign policy. A leader, who was known for his unilateral approach to world affairs, built a coalition of more than 100 countries in just a few weeks' time. This action alone isolated bin Laden, and made him work for support and legitimacy among the moderate Muslim community. America's seething desire for revenge was held in check; our response would be measured and deliberate, and would involve every aspect of the U.S. government. Within days, a host of government agencies got past stovepiped cultures to track down leads, freeze monetary assets, and share intelligence. Not a bad start.

Bin Laden's Center of Gravity

Perhaps there is comfort in Clausewitz' words: "Even when great strength has been expended on the first decision and the balance has been badly upset, equilibrium can be restored."¹⁵ Yet how do we go about winning this war on terrorism? The trinity construct serves as a framework to examine our enemy, and focus on that which is the hub of his existence. By finding his center of gravity, we know what is most valuable to bin Laden, and can then proceed with plans to take it from him.

In effect, bin Laden is his own leader or head of government. While taking him out would satisfy a strong desire for retribution, it would not win the war. In fact, it would likely make matters worse. Hamid Mir, editor of the *Daily Ausaf* in Islamabad, has interviewed bin Laden four times, and has written the only official bin Laden biography, scheduled to be published later this year. Mir thinks targeting bin Laden is the wrong approach: "Dead Osama will be more dangerous, thousands of new Osamas will [be] born."¹⁶ Bin Laden is not the center of gravity.

The Taliban, or the military forces associated with bin Laden's network of terror, is not the center of gravity either. Mohammad El-Sayed Sae'ed, an expert in the Ahram Center for Political & Strategic Studies in Cairo, considered the danger of a world war: "If the U.S. retaliates, it would serve his [bin Laden's] cause, for it would become a battle between Muslims and non-Muslims, triggering a worldwide religious

war...the world would mobilize against Islam and its people, and Islam would become a religion of violence and intolerance.”¹⁷In fact, a large military counterattack could serve as bin Laden’s best recruiting tool.

“Quiet is America’s friend; killing, of Americans by bin Laden and of Arab civilians by Americans, is bin Laden’s friend, because it draws ordinary people as well as combat troops to his side.”¹⁸

Similar to the United States, bin Laden’s center of gravity rests with the passion or people. His power rests not with the loud, fundamentalist militants, but with the moderate Muslim majority. If they support the United States and the coalition, bin Laden is isolated—loud, dramatic, but alone. He cannot win without them. We cannot win without them either.

Why Do They Hate Us?

Keeping the moderate Muslims in the coalition -- supporting us and isolating bin Laden -- is the key to success. This task is complicated by our lack of understanding of their language, their culture, or their motivation. And what do they think of us? Much has been said since September 11th about how much the people of Islam hate Americans. It’s difficult for us to imagine—after all, we’re the last best hope—what’s there not to like? Ajab Gul, a barber in Peshawar summed up his impression of our culture: “Looking out for No. 1, that’s the American way, isn’t it? That is what Americans are proud of. We’re different.”¹⁹ Hamid Mir, the bin Laden biographer, explained it this way: “Most of the people like him [bin Laden] because people are against America. He is a hero by default. Many people don’t share his ideology, but they are supporting the enemy of their enemy, which is America.”²⁰

This is a hatred bred of ignorance, according to Robert Stewart, a former Army intelligence analyst. “Most Muslims have no idea that the U.S. government is sending food to Muslims around the world....Nor are they aware that the United States, already the world’s largest supplier of food aid to Afghanistan, will send an additional \$320 million in humanitarian assistance.”²¹

But this is also a hatred bred of knowledge. Many Muslims know more about U.S. foreign policy than Americans do—policy that creates resentment toward America. London staff writer for *Christian Science*

Monitor, Peter Ford explained that Muslims and Arabs were horrified—but not surprised—by the attacks of September 11th: “The buttons that Mr. Bin Laden pushes in his statements and interviews—the injustice done to the Palestinians, the cruelty of continued sanctions against Iraq, the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, the repressive and corrupt nature of U.S.-backed Gulf governments—win a good deal of popular sympathy.”²² John L. Esposito, Professor of Religion and International Affairs at Georgetown University, said it’s time to realize that “they see more than we see. Anti-Americanism is driven not by the blind hatred or religious zealotry of extremists, but by a frustration and anger with U.S. policy among the mainstream in the Muslim world.”²³

Key to Success: Don’t Lose!

This proliferation of resentment toward the United States plays an integral role in the war on terrorism. Holding a multi-nation coalition together is difficult enough without the added burden of realizing that your Muslim partners—the people who are supposed to be on your side—don’t really like you. This issue becomes especially sensitive when conducting military operations against Muslims. The use of overwhelming force is not palatable with some coalition members, who are already calling for an end to military operations in Afghanistan. Also, despite our best efforts and most sophisticated technologies, collateral damage resulting in the death of innocent civilians is a reality of war – one that can quickly turn world opinion against the United States. Clausewitz says to “be certain our political position is so secure that this success will not bring further enemies against us who could force us immediately to abandon our efforts against our first opponent.”²⁴ Applied to the current situation, his meaning is reflected in a recent Washington Post article, defining victory: “Short-term victory means the destruction of al Qaeda, the defeat of the Taliban, and the establishment of a government in Afghanistan that is not hostile to the United States. It means also accomplishing these goals without creating an environment that leads to ancillary disaster, notably the takeover in Pakistan or Saudi Arabia by radical anti-American Islamicists.”²⁵

So while we're fighting the battle on the ground, we must also give due consideration to the battle in the mind. Success is not so much a matter of getting the moderate Muslims to like us – in fact, it's okay if they hate us. They just have to hate bin Laden more.

Being “less hated” than a mass murderer who publicly praised the terrorist acts of September 11th sounds like an easy mission – but the truth is, we're losing the battle for hearts and minds. And despite Clausewitz' comment about the possibility of regaining equilibrium, coming from behind is always painful. “The United States lost the public relations war in the Muslim world a long time ago,” said Osama Siblani, publisher of the *Arab American News* in Dearborn. “They could have the prophet Muhammad doing public relations and it wouldn't help.”²⁶ Richard Holbrooke, U.S. representative to the United Nations in the Clinton administration wrote: “Defining what this war is really about in the minds of the 1 billion Muslims in the world will be of decisive and historic importance. Yet every expert in Islam, every analyst of what is happening in the Muslim world, agrees that Osama bin Laden has gained the initial advantage in this struggle...How can a man in a cave out communicate the world's leading communications society?”²⁷

On Media: bin Laden Uses our “Freedom of the Press” Against Us

Osama bin Laden orchestrated the terrorist attacks to exploit the United States' fascination with visual images and symbols. He selected the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as targets because they are the visual icons of America's wealth and military strength. He chose the timing of successive strikes to guarantee the undivided attention of every news outlet around the world, as they provided live coverage of the diabolical plot unfolding, like so many acts in a tragic play. He understood the power of the camera, and as a result, America suffered more than a horrendous loss of life; we were dealt the perhaps more deadly blow of coming face to face with our own vulnerability—over and over again—with each haunting replay of U.S. airliners slamming into towering buildings. The effects of this vulnerability are amplified by the realization that the whole world was compelled to watch with us.²⁸

Bin Laden's success in the communications arena can be credited to one thing: a plan. He had plenty of time to think through each message he wanted to send, and how he wanted to send it, right down to the visual aids of U.S. airliners. His messages are simple, and full of symbolism that resonates with his intended audiences. He has worked on his timing, his gestures, and even his delivery systems. The United States, on the other hand, was left reeling and speechless in the wake of the terrorist attacks. Some of our early messages were garbled, resulting in unintended consequences. Retired Pakistani Air Commodore Sajad Haider spent ten years in Washington as his country's military attaché, and considers America a friend and natural ally. Yet even he recognizes only one use for the word 'Crusade.' "When Bush talked of a Crusade...it was not a slip of the tongue. It was a mindset."²⁹

We Need a Plan

During Kosovo, it appeared that Milosevic had charge of the media agenda. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, along with his press spokesman, Alastair Campbell and a team from the Downing Street Press Office reported to NATO, creating a Media Operations Centre that turned the tide. Resembling a presidential election campaign, their massive media campaign shored up public opinion by constantly reminding the general public and NATO leaders that the war was the fault of Milosevic and his ethnic cleansing policy. Jamie Shea said, "I don't think media campaigns win conflicts....But an inept media campaign can lose you the conflict."³⁰

To win against bin Laden, the United States must also have a plan. Maintaining public support at home, and winning the 'hearts and minds' abroad will require a strategic communications plan. The plan must include specific, accurate messages, tailored to each of our intended audiences, and matched to an appropriate and effective messenger. In the simplest of terms, we need to think through what to say, how to say it, who's going to say it, and to whom. Like aviation, ground combat, logistics, intelligence, and other aspects of this war, strategic communications must be conceived in concert with the rest of the plan. To be

effective, a separate communications plan cannot be applied on after the design is complete; it must be built in.

Winning—Hearts, Minds, and Clerics

The good news is, there WILL be good news. After a slow start, the Department of Defense, along with other government agencies, are taking the ‘war of words’ to heart. The Pentagon recently awarded a contract to The Rendon Group to provide a strategic communications plan for the war on terrorism. CEO John Rendon represented the exiled Kuwaiti royal family and the country’s Ministry of Information during the Gulf War, and supported campaigns for USAID programs in Bosnia. A news analyst for BBC, Rendon also served as the executive director and national political director of the Democratic National Committee.³¹ Members from The Rendon Group are now in planning cells at the Pentagon and the White House, to include the inter-agency task force that meets twice a day to discuss the administration’s message.³² Our plan is on the way.

This war, as the president has said repeatedly, is not like other wars. We will use every asset at our disposal to fight against terrorism. The same must hold true for the communication plan. Charlotte Beers, the new undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, has State Department members talking to the Advertising Council in New York to develop public service announcements on the war on terrorism, and the military action in Afghanistan. Beers is considering buying air time on Al-Jazeera television to get our message to foreign audiences.³³ Staff members from the White House recently met with Hollywood executives, to include the presidents of CBS and Warner Brothers, regarding Hollywood’s role in communicating America’s message.³⁴ After initially stiff-arming Al-Jazeera, many senior U.S. officials have conducted interviews, to include the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, Andrew Natsios, Director of USAID; Condoleeza Rice, National Security Advisor, and William J. Burns, assistant secretary of state for the Near East.³⁵ These are merely examples of strategic communications opportunities that are being explored.

Space limitations do not allow for a detailed strategic communications plan to be included as part of this paper. However, it is important to note that such a plan includes goals, objectives, and a thorough assessment of available resources: What are your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and vulnerabilities, as they apply to your message? A plan requires extensive research in the areas of audience identification, appropriate messages, and effective messengers.³⁶

Words Matter

Clausewitz defines the art of war as: “the art of using the given means in combat...in its wider sense the art of war includes all activities that exist for the sake of war, such as the creation of the fighting forces, their raising, armament, equipment, and training.”³⁷ If he were available to assess the current situation, I’m confident that Clausewitz would add the art of words, or the creation of messages, to his list. On September 11th, bin Laden struck at the passion of the American people, and he continues to strike that center of gravity with a war of words and symbolic messages. We have his center of gravity—the public opinion of the moderate Muslim community—in the crosshairs. A successful counterattack includes our own solid strategic communications plan.

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, On War (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1976) 89.

² Clausewitz 595-596.

³ Clausewitz 88.

⁴ George F. Will, "The End of Our Holiday from History," Washington Post 12 September 2001: 31.

⁵ Nicholas Lemann, "What Terrorists Want: Is There a Better Way to Defeat Al Qaeda?" New Yorker 29 October 2001.

⁶ Stanley Bedlington, "Bin Laden's ultimate ambition is even more alarming than the warrior image he projects," Washington Post 28 October 2001: B1-B2.

⁷ Mary-Jane Deeb, "A Closer Look at the Words of an Image Maker," Washington Post 28 October 2001: B2.

⁸ Sami Kohen, "From the Columns: The Afghan Effect on the Middle East," Turkish Daily News 18 October 2001, available from LEXIS-NEXIS Academic Universe,
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¹⁰ Clausewitz 136.

¹¹ Andrew Sullivan, "A British View of the US/Bin Laden Affair," The London Times, 3 October 2001; accessed from an email originated by John H. McDonald.

¹² Clausewitz 75.

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- ²⁴ Clauswitz 597.
- ²⁵ Michael Kelly, "What The U.S. Isn't," Washington Post, 24 October 2001, 25.
- ²⁶ William Douglas, "U.S. War Battled On Another Front: PR," Long Island Newsday, 23 October 2001.
- ²⁷ Richard Holbrooke, "Get the Message Out," Washington Post, 28 October 2001, B07.
- ²⁸ This display of media savvy would be repeated weeks later, when bin Laden instructed the Arab network Al Jazeera to delay broadcasting his pre-recorded message until after the first military strike in Afghanistan. This timing not only stole President Bush's media thunder during the opening salvos of our military response, but it presented an image of a confident leader who remains very much at large. Moreover, while his methodology may be horrific to the vast majority of Muslims, his words during this videotaped message "strike at the core of the grievances that the common Arab man in the street has toward his respective government." (Judith Miller, "Bin Laden's Media Savvy: Expert Timing of Threats," The New York Times On the Web, 9 October 2001, available from www.nytimes.com/2001/10/09/international/middl.../09OSAM.html?pagewanted=prin; accessed 9 October 2001.)
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³⁷ Clausewitz 127.